



More federal land access proposed

C Inventory of disposable acres asked for.

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Many producers are seeking access to federal land when burdened by drought or lack of private land for expansion. Other producers feel their state property taxes are too high. Congressman Chris Cannon, R-UT, addressed both of these issues by introducing H.R. 1370, the Federal Lands Asset Inventory Reform Act (FLAIR).

FLAIR would require the Secretary of Interior to perform a comprehensive inventory of all federal land assets. Cannon believes this will assist with better federal land management and also identify surplus, unneeded or vacant properties that the government would no longer have any interest or reason to own and transfer this surplus to the state.

This type of a national movement is long overdue in Cannon's opinion, since nearly one-third of the land in U.S., more than 670 million acres, is designated as federal land. Cannon said that the Bureau of Land Management alone has more than three million acres that have been identified as surplus and suitable for disposal.

From a tax perspective for the state, Cannon said that this means states that host the government have a severely diminished tax base and cannot fully meet the demands of the federal government to fund law enforcement, environmental compliance, health care and education, as well as other mandates. Cannon did note that the federal government compensates the loss of tax revenue through the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program (PILT), but he said Congress has consistently failed to fully fund the program. For example, this year's PILT funding request of \$200 million is \$26 million less than last year and is \$150 million short of full funding. Last year was the highest ever funding for PILT, and the program was still over \$100 million short, according to Cannon's estimates.

The result is taxpayers pay more in local property taxes to make up the shortfall, Cannon said. If the FLAIR Act is approved by both the House and the Senate, then states would be able to disperse taxes across a broader land base, thus reducing property taxes.

President George W. Bush's 2006 budget contains a proposal that is in line with Cannon's agenda. The proposal asks for a review of federal lands in the District of Columbia to determine if they would have more value if owned by the District.

I applaud the president for initiating an inventory of surplus federal land to be taken over by the District or the private sector, Cannon said. Especially in the private sector, such real estate can produce jobs and generate tax revenues for the District.

Cannon illustrated his theory of lost revenues using D.C. as an example. He said, in the District, where 26.3 percent of the total acreage is owned by the federal government, an estimated \$400 million to \$1.1 billion a year is lost in tax revenue to federal ownership of these lands. And, Cannon said, D.C. is a small problem compared to the western states.

In Cannon's home state of Utah, federal ownership runs approximately 66.5 percent. Utah and eleven other western states rank above D.C. in percentage of federal land ownership. Cannon noted that Nevada is 90 percent federally owned, while California is approximately 50 percent federally owned and nearly two-thirds of New Mexico and Arizona are owned by the federal government.

Cannon is chairman of the Congressional Western Caucus. The Congressional Western Caucus is a bicameral organization of nearly 60 members of Congress from the West who want to sustain a vibrant Western economy for present and future generations.

From a management viewpoint, the congressional supporters also hope the FLAIR Act will help the federal government gauge its land holdings. "The federal government really does not have an accurate assessment of what it owns, so it is tough to believe that the government can effectively manage the land if they don't know where they are at or what they are being used for," said Cody Stewart, executive director of the Congressional Western Caucus.

Cannon agreed, saying that the fire hazard has gotten out of control due to lack of management and that federal grazing lands are in terrible shape, as compared to privately owned lands.

Cannon also said, "The president should ensure that the federal land inventory he ordered last year is completed and that ownership of surplus and under-utilized land is transferred to the states. This will bolster Western economies by giving them more tax revenue and job-creation opportunities."

In the meantime, Cannon is asking that the president support a fully funded PILT program, so that rural communities can begin to support the services for which they rely on these payments.

To complement this legislation, Stewart said the Western Caucus is also supporting a bill that would set up a mechanism whereby the government would attempt to acquire additional lands in a state that has more than 25 percent in federal ownership and a bill, which is yet to be introduced, that deals with the impacts that federal land has on education.

Stewart encouraged producers to contact their congressmen and express support for these pieces of legislation. C **Sarah L. Swenson, WLJ Associate Editor**

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